

Congress Looks toward Ocean Governance Reform in 2009

By Sam Farr

Sea Technology Magazine

January 2009

The New Year brings with it a host of fresh faces and ideas to Washington -- a new president, a new Congress and a new version of the Oceans Conservation, Education, and National Strategy for the 21st Century Act.

While Washington's powerbrokers may capture our attention for the next few months, the ocean-policy legislation will be with us a lot longer and will arguably have far greater implications.

The economic meltdown and the war in Iraq gather the lion's share of global attention, but the fate of a host of issues rests on how we craft policy governing the ocean.

Climate change, an issue that has quickly leapt to the front of policy debates, is intimately connected to the ocean. The global economy also owes its health (or lack thereof) to the ocean. The U.S. economy alone enjoys hundreds of billions of dollars in contributions from ocean-related industries.

And yet our national ocean policy is a muddled, soggy mess. Within the U.S. government, six federal departments share control of the ocean, with dozens of agencies dividing up oversight duties. More than 140 laws are on the books, many that conflict and overlap with each other.

In effect, the federal government -- which rightfully plays a major role in how we treat the ocean -- often makes problems worse. On a fundamental level, we lack the capacity to coordinate the policies and rules that govern the ocean.

But the stage is set for Washington to overhaul the entire system.

January will see the re-introduction of the Ocean Conservation, Education and National Strategy for the 21st Century Act, commonly known as Oceans-21. Previous versions of this bill stalled under Republican-led Congresses, and while the bill was approved in 2008 by a House Subcommittee, it was hijacked by offshore drilling special interests.

This year, things will be different. I've spoken with Rep. Nick Rahall, chairman of the House Committee on Natural Resources, and he's as eager as I am to see this bill signed into law. And President Obama is the right leader to champion these changes.

Oceans-21 will fundamentally alter how we govern the ocean. Currently, policy is painted in broad swathes, from the top down, with limited regional contribution and often no local input. That's not how things should be done. Local stakeholders must be included in the process.

One of the fundamental goals of Oceans-21 is the creation of a national ocean policy that values regional input and focuses policymakers on ecosystem-based models of governance. We must ensure that locals -- those who best know their own waters -- are involved in the decision-making process.

Oceans-21 will create regional and national ocean advisory committees, groups that bring all levels of stakeholders to the table to advise lawmakers. The legislation will also create the position of ocean advisor in the president's Cabinet. It's past time that the underlying value of the ocean be recognized at the highest levels of power. Change must be brought about throughout all levels of government.

The United States is no slacker at ocean management, we just haven't quite gotten it right yet. We do have tools at hand. Last year we celebrated the 200th birthday of the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey, a group established by Thomas Jefferson and the predecessor of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

But NOAA has never been codified into law. It exists at the whim of each presidential administration. Oceans-21 would officially establish NOAA as the chief ocean agency. It's vital we maintain the continuity of work and knowledge that NOAA offers.

Our knowledge of the ocean has increased exponentially in the last decade thanks to programs such as the Regional and Integrated Ocean Observing Systems and the Census of Marine Life. Technological advances in remote sensing, drifters and gliders, and buoys have increased our understanding of how the ocean interacts with an increasingly human-affected environment.

Scientists are discovering new species at an amazing rate, and there is still much of the ocean left unexplored. This makes it even more important that we understand how changes in ocean temperature and acidity brought about by greenhouse gases will affect the ocean and its life.

Oceans-21 is the result of years of bipartisan work among hundreds of lawmakers, scientists and other ocean experts. It puts into action the recommendations of the Joint Ocean Commission Initiative, a bipartisan effort between the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy and the Pew Oceans Commission.

The goal of the Joint Commission is a noble one: "to accelerate the pace of change that results in meaningful ocean policy reform." And that reform is long overdue.

Our newest piece of major ocean legislation is more than 30 years old: the Magnuson-Stevens Fisheries Conservation and Management Act. This law is a valuable one, but it's only one piece of a complex puzzle. We have to bring our ocean policy into the 21st century.

Stakes are high, and problems range from pollution and beach erosion to disruptive development and overfishing. And these problems will only grow larger as more people move to coastal regions and more companies harvest the fruits of the ocean.

Obstacles are many, but we're lucky to have many individuals and groups on hand to meet the challenge, both in the United States and abroad. I'm looking forward to 2009 as a great year to build on the work we've already accomplished in Congress.

Washington has wisely given us a Clean Air Act and a Clean Water Act. It's time we get around to passing a "Clean Ocean Act" -- Oceans-21.

Congressman Sam Farr has represented California's 17th Congressional District for 15 years. He is co-chair of the House Oceans Caucus.